



# NEWS

*from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

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## **FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE HAILS VOLUNTEER-PARTNERSHIP ENHANCEMENT ACT**

A new law allowing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to expand the use of volunteers and partnerships and simplify donations made to specific national wildlife refuges was applauded today by Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark as "a historic step." President Clinton signed the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998 October 5.

"This is a very significant piece of legislation for this agency because volunteers are critically important to our ability to meet our wildlife conservation mission," Clark said. "It will allow the Service to take giant steps in three very important areas: in the recruitment and use of volunteers, in the expansion and use of partnerships, and in simplifying the rules governing financial donations to specific refuges. We're very excited about all that this bill will make possible and look forward to putting these new pieces in place."

The law, introduced in the Senate by Senator John Chafee and in the House of Representatives by Congressman Jim Saxton, will:

- o Enable the Service to implement pilot projects through up to 20 volunteer coordinators who will recruit, train, and supervise volunteers in the Service's 7 Regions.
- o Authorize establishment of a Senior Volunteer Corps focusing on volunteers over the age of 50, paying some incidental volunteer expenses, and allowing the Service to make cash awards, not to exceed \$100 each, to outstanding volunteers.
- o Provide authority for organizing and collaborating with partner organizations nationwide and streamlining the requirements for establishing community partner organizations such as the Friends of the Refuge Initiative. Partner organizations may provide financial and technical support and serve as liaisons between a refuge and its community.
- o Clarify that gifts or bequests made to a particular refuge may be spent by the same refuge, while allowing Federal funding to match (but not exceed) the amount of gifts or donations. This provision will give individual refuge managers the opportunity to use discretionary funds already available to help secure additional funds in the form of cash, property, or in-kind services.

- o Require the Secretary of the Interior to develop refuge education programs to further the mission of the Refuge System and the purposes of individual refuges. The programs are to provide outdoor classroom opportunities for students on wildlife refuges that combine educational curricula with the personal experiences of students, to promote understanding and conservation of resources of the refuges, and to improve scientific literacy in conjunction with both formal and informal education programs.

The Service's reliance on volunteers dates back to 1903 when the first refuge was established at Pelican Island in Florida and manned initially by volunteers. The Volunteer and Partnership Enhancement Act signed today strengthens the Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act of 1978, through which Congress authorized the Secretary of the Interior to recruit and train volunteers. Today there are more than 28,800 volunteers donating more than 1.5 million hours of their time on refuges. Almost 20 percent of all work performed on the refuge system is done by volunteers, amounting to about \$14 million worth of services that cost the government only \$780,000.

The Service also collaborates with conservation groups, academic institutions, business organizations, and other entities to provide services for the refuge system. Those services span a broad range and are generally performed at the local level, with individual communities supporting specific refuges in their area. In 1996, the Service established what it calls the "Friends Initiative" to more formally encourage and organize efforts to promote community involvement. With the support of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, and the National Audubon Society, 25 new Friends groups have been formed by local citizens in support of nearby refuges.

Nearly 30 million people visit wildlife refuges each year for birdwatching and other wildlife observation, hiking, fishing, hunting, nature photography, and environmental education. At least one national wildlife refuge is located within an hour's drive of almost every major city in the United States.

For more information about the National Wildlife Refuge System, call 1-800-344-WILD, or visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service homepage at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov) on the Internet. Click on "National Wildlife Refuge System" and scroll to the information category of your choice. Look under "Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," in the Federal Government section of your telephone directory to find the wildlife refuge nearest you.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish

and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.